

Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Worthy Life

By David Thunder

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David Thunder's book is a fascinating analysis of the ethics of citizenship under conditions of contemporary constitutional democracy. The essay can be easily read as a classical treaty on ethics and virtue in the *polis*, and it is probably the reason of the specific style that characterizes it, so different from the usual tone of most contemporary social science and political theory books: there is no jargon, no unnecessary difficult passages, but a flawless and always clear writing. Indeed, Thunder's book has the great merit of proposing an ethical inquiry of civic engagement as a path towards human excellence. The main theme of Thunder's enquiry is integrity, more than citizenship itself: a human life can be fully lived only through an exigent and relentless quest of a person's main call, or, as the authors writes, 'we might say that for the purposes of assessing the overall worth of a human life, what counts more than anything else is what a person is *for*' (p. 25). This requires ethical integrity, defined as 'a robust, enduring, and wholehearted commitment to integrate his desires, dispositions, actions, relationships and projects into what he responsibly and reflectively takes to be a worthy life' (pp. 27-28). The institutions and the practices of citizenship are the framework through which ethical integrity can be expressed and learned. In the world of contemporary political reflection, the feeling of transcendence that is expressed by this definition of a worthy life is at the same time disconcerting, used as we are to judge political actions either by immanent rationality or by the structures of society itself, and refreshing. It may appear disconcerting for the reasons that Thunder

himself acknowledges in the book: since modern political thought, we are used to separate ethical and political reflections. Indeed, questions that were asked by classical and medieval philosophers, such as Aristotle or St Augustin, have been expelled by the reflection of modern thinkers, like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke or Kant, given their belief that politics consists in guaranteeing the conditions of public order and justice, and for this purpose exigencies of morality were useless.

Nevertheless, this theoretical heritage, together with the need, felt during the time of the European wars of religion, of separating private beliefs and the rules of public life, have produced a situation of apathy and disaffection in our constitutional democracies. The large part of the academic literature on citizenship deals with it as a set of legislation, as a formal institution or as a set of social practices, insulating it from ethical concerns. For Thunder, this is deeply problematic since it makes present democracy more vulnerable to those demagogues who understand that citizens need a sense of meaning and purpose in life, absent from an ethically emptied political scene. This situation contributes to the disaffection of citizens from political life, 'insofar as it fails to anchor civic life and its demands in values that people care about and strive to honor on a day-to-day basis' (p. 191). Thunder is aware of the fact that what we may call 'active citizenship' is the privilege of a small part of the actual citizens of today's democratic countries, since in post-industrialised societies, civic engagement plays a peripheral role, given the actual division of labor. There is no need for the masses to be engaged into the public sphere, they can attend their everyday life, often made of private interests, while a small part takes care of the public good. The author is not naïve when it comes to depicting the concrete situation of political commitment under conditions of contemporary democracy. On the opposite, he is aware of the danger that represents a democratic regime that has no effective citizens, but only formal procedures, to sustain it. His thesis is founded upon the notion of citizenship as an interdependent and inter-relational category: it provides a basis for perceiving and exercising the

responsibilities that we have toward those who share our social space. Respecting the rule of law, being committed to constitutionalism are not enough as formal principles, since democracy requires self-integration, as a regulative ideal of inner harmony, to be nourished.

Thunder's thesis of a continuity between the ethical dimension of a worthy life and the political practice of citizenship rests upon two main hypothesis: the distinction between the ethical and the moral perspective, and the critique of the separation between individual autonomy and the social context. Let's take into account the first one: the ethical standpoint is always connected to the quest for human excellence, although not in an atomistic way, but taking into account the social context. The connection between the inner values and the social context is precisely what distinguishes it from the 'moral' point of view, which is instead constituted by the obligations towards the others and only marginally by the agent's character. This first distinction leads Thunder to a critique of the dominant approaches in political theory, namely John Rawls's political liberalism, according to which citizenship is interpreted as 'a role that enables us to achieve certain instrumental goods (wealth, personal security) or to honor our obligations toward others or to secure the exigencies of a just and stable social and political order' (p. 10). Thunder's critique of John Rawls and of general approaches that separate the ethical point of view from the moral and political ones is the object of the book's fourth chapter. It is indeed a merit of the book that it does not take for granted mainstream approaches in political theory, in particular political liberalism, but it opens up a more substantial ethical and political account of contemporary citizenship. Separatist approaches, such as the ones exemplified by John Rawls and Reinhold Niebuhr, argue that political action is governed by distinctive purposes and principles that must be partially insulated, for practical purposes, from conceptions of a well lived human life. Thunder criticizes Rawls's separation between theories of the good (which should be influenced by contingencies) and theories of justice (which should be not). He also discusses Niebuhr's thesis concerning the necessity of

departing, in the tasks of a citizen or statesmen, from the structures of 'a sensitive conscience' devoted to unselfishness and love (p.109).

Thunder's approach is much more contextual and attentive to the social dimension of political theory than classical political liberalism. This is what he calls a 'situated approach', which is 'firmly grounded in the *actual and contingent situation* of persons. According to this approach, the appropriate starting point for evaluating citizenship is not the ethical appeal of citizenship in some carefully restricted choice situation such as Locke's 'state of nature' or Rawls' 'original position', but the *actual situation we find ourselves in*, including our existing history, institutions, relationships and realistic opportunities for action' (p. 140).

The international and situated character of Thunder's approach is his main advantage towards classical political liberalism when it comes to discussing contemporary citizenship. The main limits of Thunder's book are, in my view, the little attention he pays to the other part of the continuum between ethics and politics, that is politics. Indeed, citizenship is very well investigated in its ethical dimension, and this is the original and refreshing contribution of his book, but very little is said on the political dimension of this practice. The argument of the book would have been enriched by a boldest step into the realm of the effective conditions of civic engagement under contemporary democracies, to then come back to its ethical counterpart.

Teresa Pullano
University of Basel
Basel, CH-4020
Switzerland
Teresa.pullano@unibas.ch